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Transforming Journalism.... 140 characters at a time

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Transforming Journalism.... 140 characters at a time

Abstract

Twitter is becoming such an important reporting tool and audience interaction zone for media outlets. But the microblogging platform brings with it professional pitfalls and highlights ethical dilemmas central to 21st century journalism, argues Julie Posetti

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TRANSFORMING JOURNALISM ... 140 CHARACTERS AT A TIME

TWITTER IS BECOMING AN ESSENTIAL REPORTING TOOL AND AUDIENCE INTERACTION ZONE FOR MEDIA OUTLETS. BUT THE MICROBLOGGING PLATFORM BRINGS WITH IT PROFESSIONAL PITFALLS AND HIGHLIGHTS ETHICAL DILEMMAS CENTRAL TO 21ST CENTURY JOURNALISM, ARGUES JULIE POSETTI

Barack Obama put Twitter (www.twitter.com) on the media map when he made it part of his successful digital election strategy in 2007. But the phenomenally popular microblogging platform, which now has more than 10-million users worldwide, became big news once the media realised its power as a tool for covering breaking news during the Mumbai massacre in 2008, after which there was an explosion of professional journalists in the Twittersphere.

This growth has been fuelled by increasing mainstream awareness of the importance of social media to the future of a crisis-ridden industry and the elevation of Twitter as a platform for reporting, news dissemination, citizen journalism and audience interaction. The latter being a strategy which aims to break down the barriers between news producers and consumers that silo "legacy media" and threaten to undermine the future of journalism in the Social Media Age.

But as much as Twitter is fast becoming an essential tool in a reporter's kitbag, there are also significant pitfalls and ethical dilemmas that professional journalists need to navigate in the space. The value of Twitter to professional media outlets and the challenges it poses for journalism were in glaring view as it hit the headlines again during the Iranian uprising in June.

Twitter's role in the Iranian election aftermath is clearly worthy of closer analysis – it leaves no doubt about the power of the medium as a global, real-time, citizen-journalism style news wire service that countered mainstream media priorities and temporarily circumvented official censorship.

But the role of Twitter as a professional reporter's tool in the coverage was as problematic as it was compelling. Twitter propelled much false information amidst valuable insights into the suffering of the Iranian people, highlighting the importance of verification for professional journalists operating in the twittersphere.

Ahead of the Iranian election, I began researching the ways in which journalists and traditional media outlets are using Twitter (see www.pbs.org/mediashift/julie-posetti) and exploring the ethical dilemmas raised by the clash of the personal and the professional for journalists in the sphere, while considering the rules of engagement for tweeting reporters. As part of this research, I surveyed 25 professional journalists on Twitter from Australia, South Africa and the US and analysed their responses.

My key conclusion: reporters need to be space-invaders in the twittersphere that has three main media functions: firstly, breaking and disseminating news; secondly, crowdsourcing news and contacts; and, thirdly, audience engagement.

And while I don't regard Twitter as the salvation of professional journalism, neither do I see it as a threat. Rather, I view tweeting as one of the skills journalists need to extend their professional practice and I believe Twitter is an essential venue for media outlets seeking to build new audiences and remain relevant as traditional audiences tune out.

How and why do journalists use Twitter?

In Australia, where journalists are in a twittering frenzy, the platform was incorporated into mainstream news coverage of the "Black Saturday" bushfires that devastated the southern state of Victoria in February, claiming 173 lives. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) pioneered the use of Twitter in coverage of the disaster with impressive results.

In the months that followed, Twitter became an embedded component of the ABC's breaking news coverage, being used to report violent storms and a state election in the

What is Twitter?

What?

Why?

How?



Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: **What are you doing?**



country's east. The ABC began breaking stories via tweets faster than the network's own website could publish them while using Twitter to crowdsource witness accounts and augment radio talkback coverage.

Reporters from remote regions through to network stars and even the corporation's managing director tweeted their way into unprecedented public engagement. At last count, the ABC was operating 92 official Twitter accounts while dozens of other staff maintain personal accounts. As Leigh Sales, the network's most prominent tweeter and presenter of the TV news analysis programme *Lateline*, told me, "I'm giving Twitter a red hot go!"

In addition to disseminating their stories, covering and tracking breaking news via Twitter, journalists are using it to crowd-source case studies and sources, subvert the modern PR machine, develop global professional networks, find jobs and market their own journalistic brand, while aiming to build potential new audiences through engagement with followers.

Heroic weapon or symptom of demise?

Some Twitter advocates believe the platform is a crucial feature of the defensive strategy in the struggle to preserve professional journalism. But there are still barriers to journalists'

TWITTER: A WORKING DEFINITION

Founded in 2006 by geeks and originally intended just for geeks, it's an interactive microblogging platform based on the open publication of messages 140 characters long. Instead of finding 'friends', you accumulate 'followers'. Twitter identifies itself as 'a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?' It could also be described as a public-sphere form of instant messaging, a global open chat room or Facebook status updates on steroids.

The language of Twitter describes users as "twits" or "tweeters" and the updates as "tweets" – appropriately evocative of chirping birds. Tweets can include links to other online material, such as relevant articles, pictures and videos.

When fellow twits re-disseminate one of your tweets, the practice is called retweeting (flagged in the message with a RT).

You can access Twitter via the web or your mobile by using one of myriad applications developed to enhance the platform.

SOME TWITTER ADVOCATES BELIEVE THE PLATFORM IS A CRUCIAL FEATURE OF THE DEFENSIVE STRATEGY IN THE STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM, WHILE OTHERS VIEW IT AS THREATENING AND DANGEROUS – ANOTHER WEAPON IN THE ONGOING WAR AGAINST PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

active participation in the twitterverse. There are the practical realities, such as limited online access in developing countries, of course, but other impediments are a product of resistant mindsets among journalists and their employers.

Some resistors view Twitter as threatening and dangerous. Detractors have argued that it is either another weapon in the ongoing war against professional journalism which threatens to sink the fourth estate, or a symptom of its demise. In echoes of the great blogging vs journalism debate you may hear them say “Twitter isn’t journalism”. No, of course it’s not, it’s a platform like radio or TV – with unfettered interactivity. But the act of tweeting can be as journalistic as the act of headline writing. Similarly, Twitter can be used for real-time reporting by professional journalists in a manner as kosher as a broadcast news live report.

John Bergin, Sky News Australia’s deputy digital editor, says professional journalists resistant to Twitter and other social media platforms simply need to get over it and get on board. “Replace the word ‘Tweet’ with ‘talking to people’ and see if your argument still sticks,” he challenged. “The act of journalism is dialogue... We test points of view, explore a friction of ideas, or get an understanding of the thinking of the ‘man on the Clapham omnibus’... Twitter is but one more tool to use in the information age – and it has an immensely empowering and social dynamic to it if it is done right.”

Your attempt to access porn has been denied

While some media outlets are making tweeting close to compulsory for their reporters, the most resistant are either so afraid of Twitter, or so disdainful about its journalistic potential, that they’ve tried to bar their journalists from even accessing it in the workplace. The *Sydney Star Observer’s* (SSO) Harley Dennett said he has been denied access to Twitter at work via web filters on office computers.

“The publishing editor said staff can make those contacts in their own time,” he explained. “But I get around that by using the Tweetie desktop and iPhone applications. I do so openly and unashamedly.” And the SSO frequently publishes stories he’s sourced via Twitter.

The SSO’s policy may be a short-sighted and narrow-minded approach to managing the issues raised by journalists’ interactions with social networking sites but it’s not an isolated example. Australia’s Pacific Magazines has also barred its journalists from accessing social networking sites, including Twitter, from their desks and while Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited group allows its reporters access, senior editorial management generally takes a dim view of Twitter.

Jonathan Ancer, from South Africa’s Independent Newspapers group, said he planned to use Twitter to help trainee journalists write with brevity and clarity, but he was also barred from access at work.

“When I tried to log onto Twitter a few days ago, I was surprised to find myself blocked with a note saying my attempt to access porn had been recorded,” he said. “I think media companies should open up access to Twitter, Facebook and other social networking platforms because this is where people – readers, eyeballs, etc. – are going.”

However, while individual journalists with the Independent group may have difficulty

TOP 20 TAKE-AWAY TIPS FOR TWEETING JOURNOS



1. Think before you tweet: you can’t delete an indiscreet tweet.
2. Think carefully about what you’re retweeting and acknowledge if it is unsubstantiated.
3. Be an active twit: tweet daily if you want your followers to stick.
4. Determine your Twitter identity.
5. Be human. Be honest. Be open. Be active.
6. Don’t lock your account if you want to use Twitter for reporting purposes – this fosters distrust.
7. Twitter is a community, not a one-way conversation or broadcast channel: actively engage.
8. Check if your employer has a social media policy. Follow it if they do.
9. Be cautious when tweeting about your employer/ workplace/colleagues.
10. Be a judicious follower – don’t be stingy, but avoid following everyone as your list grows.
11. If you quote a tweet, attribute it.
12. Expect your competitors to steal your leads if you tweet about them.
13. Don’t tweet while angry or drunk.
14. Avoid racist, sexist, bigoted and otherwise offensive tweets and never abuse a follower.
15. Scrutinise crowdsourced stories closely.
16. Find people to follow and foster followers by pilfering the lists of other twits.
17. Twitter is a time vampire – you don’t need to keep track of all tweets. Dip in and out through the day.
18. Prevent information overload by using an application such as TweetDeck.
19. Set up your internet-enabled mobile device so you can live-tweet on the road.
20. Value-add your tweets with links, Twitpic and other applications for audio and video.

accessing Twitter, the company’s online publication has a moderately active Twitter account, and an editor who tweets too.

South Africa’s media certainly need to make active use of Twitter ahead of the 2010 Soccer World Cup when they’ll be seeking the world’s eyeballs.

Rules of engagement for tweeting journos

US media outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal* the *New York Times*, Associated Press and Bloomberg have (in some cases controversially) recently instituted social media policies with specific application to Twitter. Some of these policies have been criticised for missing the point of social media – humanised interaction – and too rigidly regulating journalists’ tweeting.

But Australian and South African journalists interviewed indicated no such policies existed in their workplaces (although the ABC was preparing one at the time of writing). All of them were self-regulating their tweeting and some were still grappling with the process. When asked why he thought his Australian employer didn’t have a Twitter policy, one journalist responded, “They just don’t get it.”

As Twitter becomes entrenched in daily reporting practice, it would seem appropriate for media organisations to update existing editorial guidelines to make them relevant to social media platforms like Twitter. But if they want to bank on the significant benefits that can flow from their participation in the twittersphere (such as developing new audiences and enhancing traffic to their websites), they will need to ensure their journalists have unfettered access to the site and also be flexible about interactions in the space.

Many of the interviewees underlined the importance of journalists actively interacting with their followers rather than just eavesdropping on conversations. “To dig any deeper than 140 characters ... requires engagement,” said Dave Earley from Murdoch’s *Courier Mail*. “This requires you to be a real person, start building real relationships, gradually trust, and then contacts. Twitter can start being more helpful to journalists specifically when those contacts

start passing on news tips to you directly.”

Social media, journalists and objectivity

One of the key contemporary journalistic dilemmas – how to define or redefine objectivity in the Social Media Age – is being played out live on Twitter. Why is Twitter central to this dilemma? Because it merges the professional and the personal – challenging professional norms and blurring the lines between private and public actions for journalists trained to be didactic observers and commentators rather than participants in debates and characters within stories.

Reporters’ use of the platform to express feelings and opinions on a range of issues has raised red flags about professional conduct and bias. Paradoxically, this exposure humanises journalists in the eyes of the people they need to consume their journalism, potentially making them and their work more appealing. Wotnews.com editor, Gen Robey, says keeping the personal and professional separate is increasingly difficult when you’re trying to maximise the benefits of communities like Twitter. “The overlapping of the personal and professional, and thus emphasis on trust and meaningful relationships, is often what makes Twitter so powerful.”

Some of the journalists I interviewed tackled this dilemma by choosing to separate the personal and professional spheres of their lives – tweeting only on-the-job or off-the-clock, for example. Others included a disclaimer in the brief bibliography that appears on their Twitter home page indicating the views they expressed via Twitter were their own. Some didn’t mention their employers and a couple tweeted anonymously, but most openly identified themselves and their professional status and only two locked their accounts for privacy. This reflects a broad understanding of the importance of openness and transparency within social media communities and the professional requirements of information-gathering for reporting purposes which demand identification.

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You can't delete an indiscreet tweet

Twitter also exposes society's scrutineers to the same scrutiny they're used to reserving for the subjects of their stories. And, as some journalists have discovered, that can be a chastening experience.

One reporter who's been forced to reassess his use of Twitter as a public platform for his personal views is the *Sydney Morning Herald's* technology writer, Asher Moses. Moses was caught up in a Twitter scandal after making sexist comments about a woman who levelled sexual assault allegations against a group of professional footballers.

"Although I wrote the tweet in my own time on a personal Twitter account... I used two words ('slutty groupy') that in hindsight were inappropriate, particularly considering I mainly used Twitter for work-related messages. I quickly deleted the post, but by then it was too late," he said. "It's sad in a way, but you really have to assume that whatever you write is going to be viewed by the whole world and you have to be prepared for people to link your personal views to your employer."

But, while not endorsing his views, Australian Consolidated Press' Jason Whittaker, defended Moses' right as a journalist to tweet his opinions and indulge in news commentary in the aftermath of the controversy. He maintains a Twitter account that showcases his opinions, blending the personal and the professional and asked: "Do journalists who use Twitter have to be mindful of being in the public domain and project the same perception of objectivity as they do on the clock as a journalist? Even if they're commenting on matters they have nothing to do with as a journalist? Are readers capable of making the distinction; can't they accept journals are not mindless drones and DO have opinions, but this doesn't mean they can't do the job as an objective observer when on the clock?"

But other journalists interviewed preferred to avoid commenting on sensitive issues altogether, to escape perceptions of bias. Sky News' John Bergin had this advice for balancing the personal and the professional: "Think carefully about what hat you're wearing when you share personal opinions and political views – is it clear to others that you are speaking on behalf of yourself, or your employer? If you express an opinion on a news story, think about how this will be construed if you are then required to report on the facts of the same issue at a later date."

He also spoke of the need to apply basic media law training to tweeting and to display respect for colleagues.

So, what information on Twitter is fair game for a journalist to report? My preliminary views go like this: Although social media etiquette may not recognise a journalist's right to report any material published openly, the reality is that open Twitter accounts are a matter of permanent public record and fair game for journalists. While attribution is vital and it might be polite (but not necessary) to seek the approval of a tweeter to quote them, I don't see anything unethical about using tweets in mainstream news coverage. However, the locked Twitter account is a more delicate matter. I'd suggest that a locked account amounts to an off-the-record comment that requires permission from the tweeter before re-publishing.

Lessons via Iran

Twitter's impact on traditional news services was demonstrated during the Iranian uprising. But, as reporters relied on Twitter as a means of crowdsourcing coverage in a zone from which most Western journalists had been banished, it also highlighted some of the key



dilemmas faced by professional reporters in the twittersphere. At the centre of these struggles is the core journalistic value of truth.

When I raised concerns on Twitter about the practice of tweeters who openly identify as professional journalists re-tweeting (or RT) – re-publishing someone else's tweet – without verification, in the context of the flood of tweets supposedly emanating from Iran, I found myself engaged in a lively discussion. I asserted that when Patrick LaForge, an editor at the *New York Times*, re-tweeted (without acknowledgement of verification or absence thereof) a third-hand list of Iranian tweeters, it amounted to an acknowledgement of the authenticity of that list. But LaForge disagreed. NYU's Jay Rosen then reminded me not to expect open systems like Twitter to behave in the same manner expected of editorial systems.

However, while I agree with Rosen, my concern was not directed at the unmediated twittersphere. Rather, it was directed at the way journalists approach this flood of information. I'm of the view that professional journalists will be judged more harshly if they retweet content that later proves to be false – particularly in the context of a crisis. This goes to their professional credibility and their employer's.

Therefore, while I wouldn't suggest journalists step back from reporting on social media contributions flowing from zones like Iran, I do think they need to critically assess information to the best of their capacity before republishing it and, if there's no way to do so, flag it as being unconfirmed or unsubstantiated.

The issues at stake here partly evolve from Twitter's speed imperative that encourages us to file instantly, sometimes without enough thought for the public nature of the platform. It's very easy to get Twitter-happy and post without fear of the consequences.

There remain significant outstanding questions that need to be considered as Twitter becomes a feature of everyday reporting in many newsrooms. For example, how much of an additional burden is daily tweeting and audience engagement on already overloaded journalists? And what's the impact of constant tweeting on their capacity to produce original, quality journalism?

There needs to be further discussion between media professionals, their employers, journalism academics and social media experts to help navigate this complex territory. But journalists and media outlets can no longer afford to simply ignore Twitter; it's no fleeting trend.

**MY CONCERN IS THE WAY
JOURNALISTS APPROACH THIS
FLOOD OF INFORMATION –
PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS
WILL BE JUDGED MORE
HARSHLY IF THEY RETWEET
CONTENT THAT LATER PROVES
TO BE FALSE, PARTICULARLY IN
THE CONTEXT OF A CRISIS**

USEFUL LINKS

The US-based PBS website Mediashift has published a guide to Twitter at www.pbs.org/mediashift/2007/05/your-guide-to-micro-blogging-and-twitter135.html

Mashable recently launched an online guidebook at <http://mashable.com/2009/06/26/twitter-guidebook/>.